

House votes to keep its assassination probe going

Editorial, 22-A

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WASHINGTON — The House extended Wednesday the life of its Committee on Assassinations through the rest of the congressional term, giving it nearly two more years to investigate the murders of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

The vote to renew the panel's mandate, which was to have expired tonight, was 230-181.

The trouble-plagued committee may have helped to save its own life in a dramatic last-minute move, persuading its controversial chief counsel, Richard Sprague, to resign to appease representatives offended by his abrasive style and his role in committee power struggles.

THERE WAS NO indication that the House vote was influenced by the apparent suicide in Palm Beach of a witness termed "crucial" to the investigation of the Kennedy assassination.

Police said George de Mohrenschildt, 65, who described himself as a friend of Lee Harvey Oswald, was found dead of massive shotgun wounds to the head Tuesday. They said his death appeared to be a suicide.

Committee investigators had been trying to contact de Mohrenschildt even though the Warren Commission concluded there was no evidence linking him to the Kennedy slaying.

Committee member Richardson Preyer, D-N.C., said the man was "a crucial witness for us, based on the new information we had. He was intimately involved with Oswald."

SOME REPRESENTATIVES fought renewal of the panel's mandate to the end, expressing doubt about its capabilities and challenging the usefulness of spending taxpayer money on fresh investigation of either murder.

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"This investigating committee is a sick cat," said J. J. Pickle, D-Texas. He recommended turning the investigations over to the Justice Department.

"Kennedy is dead," said Rep. James Quillen, R-Tenn. "King is dead. Let's not spend the taxpayers' money. Let's end the committee."

Rep. Robert Bauman, R-Md., tried to force the House into a secret session to hear panel members attempt to justify statements that they have uncovered fresh evidence in the King and Kennedy cases.

But that motion was defeated 226-185 after committee chairman Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, objected to divulging the information even in secret session for fear of leaks.

THE PANEL has suffered internal dissension and has had three chairmen.

Tuesday night, members persuaded Sprague he had to resign to placate those he has offended.

"It was felt the only possible way to assure (House) passage was for Sprague to remove himself," a committee spokesman said. "And the feeling when all was said and done was that the investigation is bigger than any one person. Sprague therefore removed himself. He is no longer in town."

The counsel submitted a terse, two-sentence resignation letter shortly before midnight. The committee accepted it Wednesday by an 11-1 vote that had some members contending he had been railroaded out as the victim of a new "McCarthyism."

"WE HAVE SEEN a witchhunt and the devastation of human rights," said Rep. Stewart B. McKinney, R-Conn., a Sprague backer who nonetheless voted to accept the resignation. Only Rep. Charles Thone, R-Neb., voted not to accept Sprague's withdrawal.

Sprague, a former assistant district attorney in Philadelphia, stirred considerable resentment on Capitol Hill by winning a personal power struggle with former panel chairman Henry Gonzalez, D-Texas.

Gonzalez tried to fire Sprague for allegedly exceeding

his authority as staff counsel. He called the attorney "a prima donna" and "a rattlesnake." But all the other members sided with Sprague, and Gonzalez himself resigned March 1.

On the final vote, Florida members acted as follows: Democrats for extending the investigation — Gibbons, Lehman, Pepper, Rogers; Democrats against — Bennett, Chappell, Fascal, Ireland, Sikes; Democrats not voting — Fuqua; Republicans against — Bafalis, Burke, Frey, Kelly, Young.